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### "An Eyeful"

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# **"An Eyeful" | Augustana College**

## **"An Eyeful"**

### **Augustana Magazine, Summer 2004**

#### **Steven C. Bahls, President of Augustana College**

The most memorable day of my first year at Augustana College was clear and crisp, as many are here in January. I had just completed my open office hours in our library coffee shop, Java 101. The students with whom I met had, as always, much on their minds, and our conversations were invigorating - discussions of the how our campus might become more diverse, concerns about admission to graduate schools, questions about my vocation walk and thoughtful discourse about the role of athletics and the Greek system at the College.

Feeling energized by the discussion, I bundled up for a brisk walk back to my office in Founder's Hall. As I walked across the head of the pond, I looked up the ravine and noticed a great horned owl, swooping low over the water. I had never seen a great horned owl before and it was a thrill. How appropriate, I thought. The owl, a symbol of wisdom, residing on the campus of a liberal arts college.

As I turned to complete my walk to my office, I saw a bald eagle gliding on thermals above Old Main. Because bald eagles have returned to this region in great numbers, I was accustomed to seeing the majestic birds in the area, but I had not seen one on campus. I thought about a recent conversation I'd had with leaders in the local Native American community about the return of the eagles. For many Native American communities, the eagle is symbol of vision. How appropriate for a liberal arts college to serve as home for both an owl and an eagle, symbolizing knowledge and vision.

A few minutes later I approached my office. Several members of our staff were standing outside gazing up to the top of the cross above Ascension Chapel. A faculty member had identified the raptor perched there as a peregrine falcon. Like the great horned owl, I had never seen a peregrine before. In many cultures, a falcon - especially the falcon's eye - is a symbol of spirituality. In one day, birds representing wisdom, vision the spirituality were all present on the Augustana campus.

The owl, the falcon and the eagle all have sharp eyes. Professor Rivka B. Kern Ulmer, of Bucknell University, recently wrote an article in the Journal of Religion and Society about the "divine eye" as a religious symbol. She observes that in many religious traditions eyes "serve as a religious symbol signifying clarity and light," as well as "all-seeing and omnipresent divinity." At the center of Augustana's seal is an eye, which is particularly appropriate for a church-related college. The seal and the raptors on campus serve to remind us of our mission - to help students see clearly.

Seeing clearly speaks to the development of wisdom by fostering habits of the mind. Seeing clearly also entails

developing vision which both suffuses and transcends the mind. Our students develop vision through vocational reflection - by linking their passions and talents with the needs of society. This, in turn, helps our students learn to see clearly by exploring and deepening their spirituality.

For those familiar with this place, it will come as no surprise that one of the most inspiring memories from my first year at Augustana came as the result of a brief walk across the campus. Many years ago, Conrad Bergendoff, president of the College from 1935 to 1962, asked a question which has yet to be answered: "Who can estimate the silent influence a beautiful campus can make on the hundreds of young people who daily walk over it?" Since my January stroll under the eyes of an owl, an eagle and a falcon, I am more convinced than ever that the answer may never be fully plumbed.



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